4 Jesus Christ

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Along with the Scripture principle, the axiom of *solus Christus* has been a hallmark of theologies in the Reformation tradition. The first indicates the priority of divine revelation over tradition, speculation, or immediate experience; the second acknowledges the sovereignty of divine grace in incarnation and redemption over against apparently synergistic conceptions of its mediation through church, sacrament, or the moral acts of Christian existence. The perfection of Christ – the integrity and completeness of his person as the God-man, and the non-transferability of his offices – is Christologically and soteriologically fundamental. For much of Protestant theological history, the incarnational and Trinitarian metaphysics underpinning these commitments were taken for granted as non-controversial. In the post-Reformation confessional period, disagreements emerged between Lutheran and Reformed over the relation of the divine and human natures of the incarnate one, partly in relation to eucharistic controversies over the ubiquity of Christ's humanity. Lutherans emphasized that the humanity of the ascended Christ shares the divine property of omnipresence, and so is present in the eucharistic elements, whereas the Reformed stressed that his humanity is localized in heaven, not in the sacrament, and that his finite human nature is incapable of containing the infinite divine Word. But both confessions remained firmly attached to the Christological orthodoxy articulated at the Council of Chalcedon: in the one person Jesus Christ fullness of deity and fullness of humanity are united, the union of the natures being such that they can neither be divided nor confused. Within this primary consensus, Lutherans characteristically stressed the union of the two natures ("without division") such that properties of one can be attributed to the other ("communication of attributes"); the Reformed characteristically stressed that the union is at the level of the singular person Jesus Christ (and so is a "hypostatic union"), and not the confusion of finite and infinite. A minority tradition, sometimes traced to Melanchthon, and strongly present in the Pietist and

revivalist theologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, gave priority to the saving benefits of Christ, eschewing what it regarded as Christological speculation, and so privileging Christ's work over his person. Nevertheless, mainstream Protestantism, within which evangelicalism emerged, was broadly committed to orthodox Christology in its exegesis, confessional statements, and didactic and polemical theology.

From its beginnings, the Protestant consensus was not immune to external critique or internal dissent. An important early factor was the rise of theologies which recast Christianity into the idiom of nonsalvific natural religion, abandoning the apparatus of incarnational metaphysics and soteriology and presenting Jesus as sublime moral teacher. Such accounts of Jesus, which later found a home in, for example, Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, were instinctively, and sometimes explicitly, Arian, since the moral superiority of Jesus required no assertions of his ontological unity with God. They also proved companionable to nineteenth-century historical-critical readings of the rise of Christian faith in Jesus such as those offered by F. C. Baur and D. F. Strauss. Protestant dogmaticians adopted a variety of strategies from accommodation to principled opposition. Those treasured in the evangelical tradition (such as Charles Hodge or W. G. T. Shedd) retained confidence in the norms, methods, and content of Protestant scholasticism, on the basis of which they conducted polemic against the corrosive influence of higher critical investigation of Jesus. Their successors (such as B. B. Warfield and, a little later, J. Gresham Machen) placed greater reliance upon an arsenal of historical arguments to defend orthodox Christian teaching about the deity of Christ. Moreover, as historical criticism acquired greater prestige, early evangelicals (especially in the United States) came to place Protestant doctrines of the authority of Scripture at the center of the defense of the faith. This had the effect of fusing together Christological debates and debates about the reliability of the New Testament evangelists, and so of fostering a preoccupation with historical apologetics which was to continue to characterize evangelical theology well into the twentieth century. It also led to a surprising disinvestment in positive dogmatics: the doctrines restated with such care by the old Princeton theologians were taken as read, and energy was devoted to elaborating their historical-exegetical warrants. Similar work was undertaken by some British evangelical theologians of the same period, such as James Orr; others were less involved in apologetics or the dogmatics of Protestant scholasticism. Both James Denney and P. T. Forsyth, for example, had imbibed Protestant liberalism from studying in Germany, and though they countered its characteristic

emphasis on divine immanence by recovering the theology of the reconciliation of sinner through the cross of Christ, they retained some of liberalism's moral concerns, as well as its unease about the ontological categories deployed in classical Christology.

In the middle years of the twentieth century, the revitalization of evangelical Protestantism generated a renewal of its theological self-articulation. Evangelical theology, particularly in the United States, acquired greater self-confidence, supported by a firmer institutional and churchly base, and looked to position itself vis-à-vis mainstream Protestant thought. The timing of the emergence of evangelical theology is important for its subsequent Christological development. In the mid-century, academic theology was dominated by German Protestantism, and in particular by two opposing streams: the blend of skepticism and existentialism of a Lutheran cast which held sway in New Testament studies under the influence of Bultmann; and the commanding presence in dogmatics of the Reformed thinker Barth. Evangelical theologians such as Carl Henry, eager to address themselves to their mainstream setting, judged that their context betrayed "the failure of the Barthian and Bultmannian theology,"[11] and devoted much effort to its critical dissection. One crucial effect of this was that, at the point of its attempt to shake off intellectual isolation, evangelical theology allowed its Christological agenda to be largely set from outside itself. This, in turn, meant that it often operated in reactive or defensive mode: its chief Christological concern was the collision between the dominant conventions of Protestant academia and evangelical teaching about the nature of Scripture and the person of Christ. At the beginning of this most recent phase of its history, that is, evangelical Christology found difficulty in speaking with its own voice.

Why did evangelical theology find it so hard to extricate itself from the mainstream agenda? The difficulty is, of course, familiar to traditions moving from the margins to cautious engagement with the center. But there are a number of factors peculiar to the situation of evangelical theology which should be borne in mind. One – possibly the most important – of these factors is that evangelical theology lacked dogmatic theologians with the degree of intellectual eminence required to steer an independent course aside from their mainline counterparts. Though evangelicalism produced able historians and exegetes of biblical literature, its systematicians were (and, we shall see, remain) very thin on the ground. Some dogmaticians were drafted into the tradition, such as the Dutch Reformed theologian G. C. Berkouwer (though he later became an object of suspicion to some); but the home-produced materials were largely

plodding textbooks and controversial literature, none of which seized control of the theological agenda.

This dogmatic mediocrity went hand in hand with a curious lack of interest in historical theology, both patristic and Reformation. Though evangelical Christological literature has made its appeal to some standard sources in the tradition, there has been little evidence of wide and deep study of the Christian past, and instead a tendency to fall back on well-worn readings of the classical materials. This has had the effect of cutting evangelical theology off from a source of renewal which might have enabled it to exercise greater freedom in its immediate setting, providing it with more spacious descriptions of the person and work of Christ than those on which evangelical theologians tended to rely. In the same post-war period that evangelicalism was gathering theological momentum, Roman Catholic theologians such as Congar or von Balthasar were able to shake themselves free from stultifying school theology and stimulate an extraordinary springtime of Christian orthodoxy, in part because they looked to the Christian past as a resource in outthinking the present. Evangelical theology lacked such formidable historical intelligences, however, and was less successful in resisting the pressure of its context.

A third factor which tied evangelical Christology to the trends which it opposed was, paradoxically, the doctrine of Scripture which was its most discriminating mark. For, on the one hand, such was the supremacy of the Scripture principle over all other Christian doctrines that Christological issues could become a subset of questions about biblical authority (as in defenses of the virginal conception of the incarnate Son of God on the grounds that to deny the miracle is to impugn the veracity of the evangelists' record). And, on the other hand, in a Christological context the Scripture principle was often wedded to a particular commitment to the historical reliability of Bible. This, as we shall see, encouraged interest in historical apologetics, which tended to reinforce rather than diminish attachment to mainline debates, and also to lead to puzzlement about figures like Hans Frei who declined to be drawn into the debate.

The Christological literature produced by evangelical theologians as they tried to map and respond to academic debates has shown general consistency in defending the basic tenets of conciliar orthodoxy by demonstrating their compatibility with the New Testament. Its intellectual level has been varied. In New Testament studies, scholars have produced work of independent academic merit by developing versions of historical methods of inquiry, harnessing them to an evangelical account of the nature of the Bible and using them to generate a historical rationale for orthodox

teaching. The doctrinal literature, by contrast, has generally taken one of two forms: textbooks for classroom use, or mid-level surveys of the doctrine of the person of Christ. The former type of material, pedagogical in intent, generally devotes a good deal of space to biblical and historical survey and to outlining what are taken to be the cardinal features of the dogmatic locus.[2] The genre and intended readership of these treatments are such that they survey, rather than reconceive, the topic, and tend to give voice to the consensus without venturing independent or original judgments. None of them possesses the discrimination of earlier orthodox Protestant dogmatics such as those of Kähler[3] or Schlatter,[4] or makes any pretence to rival the sheer scale of Herman Bavinck's magisterial treatment (1918); and they are considerably less demanding than the digests of Lutheran or Reformed confessional doctrine by Schmid and Heppe.[5] Perhaps the most able treatment to be found in the textbooks is that by Thomas Oden in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*,[6] which, more than any other account, thinks the material through afresh on the basis of wide and attentive reading across the range of the Christian tradition. Oden communicates the sheer compelling power of his topic in a way which is rarely achieved in the evangelical literature, though the ecumenical cast of his theology may make him less immediately companionable to some of evangelicalism's dominant strands.

Individual studies of the Christological locus have generally shared many of these restrictions.[7] Most have a common structure: a report on the relevant New Testament materials; an account of the historical career of the doctrine, especially in the patristic and Reformation periods; and an analysis of its fate in the turmoil of modern repudiation of the claims to revelation of the Christian faith. The handling of contemporary theology can be very sharp, even disdainful, as in Runia's hostile account of the main moves in twentieth-century Christology.[8] Modern theologians are presented as trading in accommodations, evasions, and compromises, or as captive to philosophical schemes such as process theism or existential phenomenology which are inimical to the Christian gospel. Not all the literature demonstrates this rancor: MacLeod's *The Person of Christ* is a very well-judged book, full of fine dogmatic description, and generous when engaged in critical appraisal; but it is an exception. The *odium theologicum* which is so often present in the evangelical Christological literature is indicative of some important characteristics of evangelical theology in general: a general (though not always well-articulated) sense that some modern theology defies the instruction of the gospel; a felt distance from the centers of theological prestige and power; and a lack

of force in driving forward a program of its own. These characteristics, and the institutional conditions which they reflect, combined with a general lack of dogmatic expertise, have meant that the evangelical tradition has not so far been able to produce the kind of calmly authoritative presentations of Christological orthodoxy that may be found in the work of modern Roman Catholic theologians such as Kasper or O'Collins.[9]

JESUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

As evangelical theology gained momentum in the 1950s, its practitioners quickly came to a decision that what were perceived to be the deleterious effects of gospel criticism could only be halted by constructing an alternative account of Christian origins and of the development of early Christology. The school of Bultmann, though more internally varied than is often allowed, combined an account of the New Testament owing much to the early twentieth-century *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, quasi-Deist reticence about any talk of God's action in the world, and a highly charged theology of Christian existence in which the securities of historical warrants could be jettisoned as mere *fides historica*. Evangelicals mounted their challenge to this primarily by using historical weaponry; only rather slender attention was given to the philosophical underpinnings of historical criticism, or, indeed, to the study of New Testament theology. A common strategy was to demonstrate, first, that a "high" Christology (one in which Jesus is in some sense intrinsic to the identity of God) can already be found in the New Testament, and, second, that such a Christology is not the invention of the early church but can be traced directly to Jesus' own self-understanding and self-proclamation. This had the effect of displacing the Bultmann school's rather abstract existentialist Christology, in which Jesus is presented as an eschatological interruption of history lacking in form and contour, by appealing to historical common sense.

Accordingly, study of the historical Jesus presented itself as a matter of considerable importance, driven by the need to establish the authenticity of the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels.[10] Both in background studies and in commentaries, evangelicals labored hard to defend the reliability of the canonical record, thereby not only vindicating their doctrine of Scripture but also preparing the way for incarnational teaching. A range of historical arguments was advanced in line with this strategy: early dating of New Testament texts in order as far as possible to close the gap between the history of Jesus and its apostolic interpreters; emphasis upon the

dynamics of conservation in early Christian culture and its resistance to external religious influence; and a corresponding de-emphasis upon the creativity of the apostolic authors and their communities. Evangelical historians of the New Testament developed some sophisticated analyses of the tradition history of the Christological titles, and enjoyed success in arguing that earlier history of religions approaches do not emerge unscathed from close scrutiny.[11] Their work found confirmation at the hands of some mainstream scholars often admired by evangelicals, such as Moule[12] or Hengel.[13]

However, increasingly sophisticated use of historical methods of inquiry has made the task of identifying the boundaries of evangelical Christological conviction more difficult. Tension between the "custodial core" of evangelicalism and its "penumbra,"[14] never far from the surface, occasionally flashed into open warfare, as in the furor over Dunn's treatment of the pre-existence of Christ in *Christology in the Making*.[15] Over the last twenty years, however, evangelical scholarship has established itself much more securely in the mainstream, where it often exercises significant leadership, and so has become much less anxious and partisan in tone. The contrast between the earlier evangelical response to mid-century gospel criticism and evangelical engagement with the so-called "third quest for the historical Jesus" is a case in point. Evangelical scholars such as Wright or Witherington have been able to do much to set the terms of the debate rather than simply reacting to a program handed to them, and proved themselves to be capable of meeting Borg or Crossan on the same ground.[16] A more general shift in New Testament studies to understanding Jesus out of the context of Second Temple Judaism has been an important factor here, particularly for those who have suggested that the first Christians viewed Jesus as internal to the identity of the God of Israel, and therefore as an object of worship.[17] Contemporary evangelical historians of Jesus and his early followers are certainly more sophisticated than their forbears, and a good deal more relaxed about the need to defend the viability of confessional orthodoxy or the reliability and authority of the apostolic witnesses. What they have in common with earlier work is the fact that their arguments are historical, not theological, and direct themselves primarily to historical reason rather than the judgment of faith. In this sense, they continue the evangelical tradition of Christology "from below" – not in the sense of proposing a "low" Christology, but in treating Jesus and his human history as apprehensible in relative independence from the dogmatic question of his relation to the divine Logos. This, it should be noted, places them at a considerable distance from one of the

primary affirmations of classical Christological teaching, namely that the humanity of Jesus is "enhypostatic" (has its existence in) the second person of the Trinity, and therefore "anhypostatic," that is, possesses no personal center of existence and agency of its own, and so is what it is solely in the Word. If this is so, then Jesus' humanity is not graspable as an historical entity without immediate reference to the Word who assumes it; incarnate humanity is not straightforwardly transparent to historical inquiry. Evangelical New Testament scholars have not so far addressed the adoptionist potential of the methods to which they have committed themselves.

DOGMATIC CHRISTOLOGY

Given the influence which Barth exercised in mid twentieth-century Protestant systematic theology, one of the chief tasks to which evangelical doctrinal theologians set themselves was responding to what was somewhat nebulously labeled "neo-orthodoxy," of which he was taken to be the exemplary instance. Barth's achievement as dogmatician was duly noted, sometimes praised, but rarely pondered at any depth; there is little evidence that those who criticized Barth so severely had much grasp of the details of his Christological thought. His espousal of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy could scarcely be quarreled with, and his aversion to moralizing renderings of Jesus won him favor. But evangelical systematicians had very little to say about some of the most significant features of his Christology, such as his remarkable reconception of the natures, states, and offices of Christ in *Church Dogmatics* IV, his Christological revision of the doctrine of God, or his distinctly Reformed account of the relation of deity and humanity in the incarnate one. For earlier evangelicals, Barth's Christology was problematic not so much for its material content as for what were taken to be its underlying epistemological flaws, above all its apparent refusal to allow that knowledge of God can be secured from history. "In its substance, Barth's Christology is, to a high degree, 'orthodox'; in its function, however, it is 'neo', constructed out of concessions to Kantianism and reactions to the multiple failures of liberalism."[18] Barth, on this account, remains trapped in Kant's metaphysical skepticism; disallowing that revelation has historical form and that the human mind is ordered toward reception of the objective truth of divine revelation, Barth disconnects Jesus from history, and so simply inverts liberal Christology. This is – to say the least – an odd (though strangely persistent) reading of Barth, inclined to transpose Barth's dogmatic ideas into epistemological mistakes, and heavily philosophical in the

alternative it offers.[19] It indicates, moreover, that evangelical theologians have tended to be more exercised about fundamental theology than about material doctrine, as can readily be seen from the characteristic slightness of their treatment of dogmatic themes.

Most of the doctrinal literature from evangelical thinkers has been content to reaffirm Chalcedonian Christology in which fullness of deity and humanity are equally ascribed to the one person Jesus of Nazareth; alongside this, there has been a consistent commitment to the use of ontological categories in Christology.[20] This is naturally linked to an Anselmian soteriology in which the full deity and humanity of the savior are required if humankind is to enjoy divine redemption. Yet, somewhat curiously, there has been no magisterial treatment of these Christological themes, despite their evident centrality. In fact, more evangelical intellectual energy has been devoted to philosophical defenses of the rationality of the doctrine of the incarnation than to its dogmatic depiction.[21] This goes hand in hand with evangelical concern for those topics in Christology which have been subject to a high degree of skepticism, notably the virginal conception of Jesus and his resurrection.

Treatments of the resurrection are a particularly good register of how dogmatic topics have often been assimilated to historical and philosophical apologetics. Some strands of evangelicalism have long had a stake in evidentialist apologetics, and Jesus' resurrection has furnished a test case for the viability of the strategy.[22] In effect, the resurrection assumes a propaedeutic function: as reason surveys the historical evidence, belief in the resurrection acquires plausibility, and with it the Christological claims of Christian faith. The strategy is only effective, it should be noted, on the basis of a relocation of Christian teaching about the resurrection. Moved out of dogmatics proper to foundations, the resurrection becomes faith's ground rather than its object, and its content has more to do with Jesus' resurrection as past event than with his presence and activity as the risen one. The effect of this relocation has rarely been noted by evangelical systematicians, who have been rather swift to subsume the resurrection within the larger project of demonstrating the objectivity and universal validity of the Christian revelation (it is this which explains the warm reception which evangelical theology has accorded to Pannenberg's early Christological work).

On the whole, evangelical systematic theology has not so far been able to shape the direction of theological work. There have, of course, been individual works of great merit, such as a recent Christological treatise of considerable force, Michael Horton's *Lord and Servant*.[23] What is most

impressive about this work is the sheer constructive power by which Horton is able to display the intellectual and spiritual structure of Christian teaching about the incarnation, and to draw attention to its interconnections with other parts of Christian doctrine such as Trinity, anthropology, and eschatology. The book reconceives the Reformed tradition of federal theology in terms of the dramatics of divine action. Appeal to this tradition could be stultifying; but here it affords entry into a much more spacious world than that of the lackluster surveys, and enables the book to persuade by descriptive cogency. Yet evangelical work of this range and power is rare; for constructive dogmatic treatments of the person of Christ, it would be more natural to turn to such near neighbors of the evangelical tradition as Otto Weber, T. F. Torrance, Edmund Schlink, or Robert Jenson.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The best evangelical theological work emerges from delight in the Christian gospel, for the gospel announces a reality which is in itself luminous, persuasive, and infinitely satisfying. That reality is Jesus Christ as he gives himself to be an object for creaturely knowledge, love, and praise. To think evangelically about this one is to think in his presence, under the instruction of his Word and Spirit, and in the fellowship of the saints. And it is to do so with cheerful confidence that his own witness to himself is unimaginably more potent than any theological attempts to run to his defense. The historical or apologetic anxieties to which evangelical Christology has often succumbed, and the jeremiads against the present age to which it has often given voice, are both overtaken by the sheer splendor of his self-communication. Evangelical Christology is properly doxological in the way it frames and accomplishes its task.

Christology responds to the self-communicative presence of its object in the twofold work of exegesis and dogmatics. Exegesis is not the same as study of the history of biblical literature and religion in their settings. Modern evangelicals have sometimes been bedazzled by the range and sophistication of historical procedures at their disposal, and busied themselves to master them in the hope of outbidding their opponents. But historical studies are the servant of exegesis, not its master. One thing which evangelical doctrines of the sufficiency of Scripture ought to have secured is that the ultimate resource is the text, not what can be reconstructed about what lies behind the text, for the text is an act of God's self-disclosure. The fruits of the immense labors of evangelical New Testament

scholars are by no means negligible; but in and of themselves they do not constitute a hearing of the Word, though they may offer much needed preparation for such a hearing. The real test of the utility of historical work is whether it enables exegesis. In a Christological context, this means that there is more to be gained from a potent reading of the Johannine prologue than from the most exquisite dissection of its historical background. Perhaps one of the most significant influences which evangelical theology might bring to bear upon the study of the New Testament would be to recall its practitioners to the task of theological interpretation, that is, reading Scripture as divine address.

Exegesis is served by dogmatics, whose task is to look for systematic connections between the constituent parts of the Christian gospel, and to attempt their orderly and well-proportioned exposition. In particular, dogmatics can help to prevent the distortions of perspective which can be introduced into an account of the faith by, for example, pressure from polemical concerns or excessive regard for extra-theological norms. Modern evangelical Christology has not been well served in this regard, and stands in need of a descriptive dogmatics of real moment. What is required is not an account of the person of Christ with better warrants (historical or philosophical) but a richer, more expansive, and fine-grained portrayal of the doctrine. In fulfilling this task, there is much help in the tradition, both ancient and more modern, and evangelical Christology may need to give its mind to the task of historical theology. As often in intellectual work, the way back may prove to be the way forward.

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Notes

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3. M. Kähler, *Die Wissenschaft der christliche Lehre* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1905).
4. Adolph Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1911).
5. Bavinck's work is now available in English as *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. III of *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (2003–06; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Henry E. Jacobs and Charles E. Hay (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961); Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, revised and ed. Ernst Bizer (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950).
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